

**Cabinet Worker Understanding
of
Ever-Changing Standards of Practice
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Abstract

Child protection workers face a lot of challenges in their daily job of securing services for those in need and protecting neglected and abused children. Child protection practice is guided by Standards of Practice and policies that vary from state to state and change on a regular basis. This study will describe the perspective of child protection caseworkers regarding the changes to the SOP, how this guides their daily social work practice, and if the changes cause work related stress. Information will be gathered by an organizational climate survey and the results will be presented to Regional office staff for informational purposes only.

Introduction

Caseworkers employed by Kentucky's Department of Community Based Services in the Protection & Permanency branch face a daunting task in their daily job duties. Protection and Permanency caseworkers have multiple roles as investigators, protectors, service providers, treatment providers, and monitors, to name a few. Information supplied in a 1995 program evaluation (Fiala and Burton, 1995) showed that caseworkers carry too many cases and that cases were becoming increasingly more difficult. In addition, the number of clients needing services has increased yearly but the number of workers has remained about the same. In July 1995 there were 1,229 workers and in June 1999 there were 1,268 workers. A number for 2004 could not be found, however, all literature for KY addresses the need for more workers.

American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) completed a Child Welfare Workforce Survey in 2004 and found an average of about 19% vacancy rates for child protection workers across the United States and 37% was the average turnover rate. In addition, the survey found that 19% of the turnover rate was preventable. A workload assessment study completed in a Pittsburg office of Children, Youth, and Families (Yamatani & Engel, 2002) showed that personnel issues are among the most challenging in Child Welfare Agencies. Yamanti & Engel state, "High personnel vacancy rates, high staff turnover rates and excessive caseloads are among the most significant obstacles of child welfare agencies striving to fulfill their legal mandate and achieve the standards of service expected of those entrusted with protecting the well-being of society's most vulnerable children (i)."

The policies and SOP's for Kentucky's Department of Community Based Services are established in the Cabinet for Health and Family Services (CHFS) in Frankfort and are meant to be the guide for practice. The SOP currently states that fifteen cases are the maximum number of cases that each worker should carry. The study conducted by Fiala and Burton (1995) revealed that caseworkers regularly carry more than state mandates specify and struggle to provide effectual services. Also, the SOP and Child Welfare Laws mandate specific time frames within which allegations of abuse and neglect must be investigated to be compliant. However, staff shortages, excessive caseloads, and systemic issues such as lack of access to needed resources, result in frequent non-compliance in child protection agencies across the United States.

A study relating to Investigation Laws and Practices in Child Protective Services was conducted by Sandra Kopels, Taliah Charlton, and Susan Wells (2003) using information gathered from child protection agencies in each of the fifty states and the District of Columbia. They found that even the most rigorous management of responding to child abuse reports will be accomplished at less than an absolute rate of 100% compliance. Yet compliance rates of less than 100% may lead to agencies being at risk of legal penalties ranging from audit penalties to a much larger liability through lawsuits, which may result in huge fines, damage claims, or court receivership (Kopels, Charlton, & Wells, 2003). To further complicate matters, SOPs change constantly. As a DCBS worker, the author, I know from personal experience that the Standards of Practice change constantly. DCBS workers receive a weekly average of five changes in the SOP through email along with a message for each worker to review the changes.

This study was an attempt to get the worker's perceptions regarding the manageability of the SOP changes and how the Cabinet communicates the changes to the worker in order for Cabinet management personnel to determine if the current way of handling the SOP information is affective.

The Department for Community Based Services has a very limited amount of research studies. Faced with heavy workloads, high caseloads, increasing liability, and high turnover for caseworkers, the Protection and Permanency delivery system is being held to higher standards of accountability by executive branch administrators, legislators, and citizens (Fiala & Burton 1995). Numerous studies done in the past have revealed extensive burnout of those employed in helping professions.

A recent study published in Social Work shows that a high percentage (57 %) of helping professionals suffer from depression and depression rates were found to be higher among social workers. This study shows that occupational factors such as heavy workloads, lack of workplace resources, and work related stress are linked to depression and, that depression causes professional impairment (Siebert, 2004). Cole, Panchanadeswaran, and Daining completed a study to examine job satisfaction of licensed social workers and found that job satisfaction decreases for social workers that have a heavy workload, poor salary, lack of support from co-workers, and unpleasant working conditions (2004).

Fiala & Burton found that the Cabinet has not had a system in place to measure the effectiveness of the current delivery of services and the challenges that impede the daily service delivery. However, The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 began making states report child welfare outcomes in 2003. Meeting the federal mandates of the act determines the amount of federal funds received by state agencies and also is factored into employee evaluations. This study was an attempt to get input from caseworkers regarding their perceptions of the ever-changing SOP and how these guide their daily job duties and if the constant changes create further work related stress.

Literature Review

The historical perspective in the literature concerning Child Protection Services has long recognized several areas of concern in the delivery of timely, effective services. Child protection caseworkers face many challenges in completing their job duties. The challenges run the gamut from systemic issues, burnout and depression, legal mandates and timeframes, and lack of appropriate resources. Fiala & Burton (1995) completed a program evaluation with the Kentucky Department of Social Services, now called the Department of Community Based Services, an agency whose mission is to provide protection to children, young people, families, and the elderly. This study revealed that caseloads are too high, workloads are very complex, and that DSS had no standard way of measuring workloads and the effectiveness of services.

An APHSA survey found that child protection worker turnover could be prevented 19% of the time. Problems identified in the survey that contributed to the preventable turnover rate were: workloads too high and/or demanding; caseloads too high; insufficient service resources for families and children; low salaries; and workers do not feel valued by the agency (APHSA, 2004). Workers attempting to manage heavy caseloads and deliver effective services are prone to work stress and burnout. Cole, Panchanadeswaran, & Daining (2004) completed a study to examine job satisfaction of licensed social workers and found that job satisfaction decreases for social workers that have a heavy workload, poor salary, lack of support from co-workers, and unpleasant working conditions (Pg. 2).

An exploratory study of work stress, burnout, and coping (Matheney, Gfroerer, Curlette, & Harris, 1999) found the costs of burnout to organizations include increased sick leave, leading to higher insurance rates, decreased productivity, decreased worker morale, and turnover. A meta-analysis of studies concerning human services workers, including those in child welfare, found stress, burnout, organizational and professional commitment, and job satisfaction to be the strongest predictors of both intention to leave and turnover (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001). The studies found that stress is consistently shown to be one of the strongest predictors of intention to leave and turnover (Pg. 80).

A more recent study completed by Nelson-Gardell & Harris (2003) at the University of Alabama brought to light a phenomenon called Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS), vicarious traumatization, or compassion fatigue that presents a risk of negative personal psychological consequences for child welfare workers. Secondary Traumatic Stress is different from burnout and results from listening, day in and day out, to the traumas of others (Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003). This phenomenon is another work related stressor that needs more exploration particularly in child welfare workers.

Child welfare workers are exposed to the traumas of other people on a regular basis. Darcy Siebert (2004) completed a study using a sample of 2,776 social workers in North Carolina to explore depression and how it impairs their work. "The implications for social work practice determined in this study was that social workers' well-being, clients' right to quality service, and protection and the professions' credibility are at risk, unless the issues of distress and impairment among its members is addressed (Siebert, 2004).

Further evidence was presented by the University of Pittsburg in 2002 that shows a link between high caseloads, burnout turnover, emotional exhaustion, and poor services (Yamatani & Engel, 2002). This study attempted to answer the question of how many cases a caseworker should be assigned each month in order to provide effective, timely services. However, since no one can predict when or what families will experience crisis or how long they will need services, or how intense those services will be, there will be major challenges associated with the measurements used.

Casework is mandated by legal time frames for investigation response and completion of reports of abuse and neglect. Across the United States workers are often noncompliant with legal requirements due to staff shortages, excessive caseloads, and lack of access to resources necessary to complete the investigation (Kopels, Charlton, & Wells, 2002). In 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed and put into place a system for measuring outcomes in child protection services; the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). The act turns the decibel level up on the need for safety and timely permanency planning for children entering and lingering in the foster care system (Greenbalt, 1998).

ASFA puts into place legislative provisions to ensure that child safety is the paramount concern in all child welfare decision-making, shortens the timeframes for making permanency planning decisions, and promotes the adoption of children who can not safely return to their own homes (Resource Guide, 2000). ASFA also requires a focus on positive results for children and families, and the need to strengthen partnerships between the child welfare agencies and other systems to support families at the community level (Resource Guide, 2000). This act puts an added burden on child welfare workers to meet the necessary time frames and to provide effective services to children and families.

NASW recognized workforce neglect as a major issue in providing quality timely services to clients involved with child welfare agencies. As stated in a Pew Commission Report by NASW; “workforce improvements are critical to addressing the needs of children and families and should begin immediately. For too many years, the need for an educated, competent, and committed workforce has been an afterthought. Educational requirements for staff are too low – as are salaries and respect – while caseloads, turnover, and scapegoating are too high” (NASW). Further study and collaboration is needed to appropriately address the current time mandates and effective delivery of services to child protection clients.

As the research literature shows, child protection workers face many hurdles in completing their jobs. The helping professionals are also prone to depression and Secondary Traumatic Stress which further hinders their job management skills. One area of work related stress that has not been explored or discussed in the existing literature is the weekly changes in the policies and Standards of Practice that guides the child protection practice. Based on the heavy caseloads and demanding work schedules, I suspect that most workers do not have time to read these ever changing SOP. This is a very critical issue as the SOP and policies have many legal aspects and ramifications for the worker.

Therefore, this study will address this topic by asking the worker's perception of the manageability of SOP changes, how the changes are communicated to them, and do the changes to the SOP increase work related stress? The results of this study will be presented to upper level management in the Cumberland Valley Region and to Central Office in Frankfort for informational purposes relating to the effectiveness of the current service delivery system in child protection.

Methods

This study was conducted through an exploratory survey design to get input from DCBS workers concerning Standards of Practice and Policies changes. Since this issue had not been researched before, this was a pilot study and will provide information for future studies and practice procedures for the Cabinet. Information was obtained through a questionnaire designed by the author.

The sample used for this study was a convenience sample consisting of Department of Community Based Service (DCBS) Protection and Permanency employees in the Cumberland Valley Region. Cumberland Valley is in southeastern Kentucky and consists of eight largely rural counties that includes Bell, Clay, Harlan, Jackson, Knox, Laurel (2 offices), Rockcastle, and Whitley (2 offices). Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Cabinet for Health and Family Services Institutional Review Board.

Cumberland Valley DCBS workers were chosen because of the availability of the sampling frame as I am an employee of this agency in Rockcastle County. A listing of workers was obtained from the SRAA, Deanne Hensley, in Laurel County and consists of 105 Protection Service workers and supervisors in the eight counties in addition to three specialized teams for Permanency, Recruitment & Certification, and Adult Protection. All employees in the Cumberland Valley Region were invited to participate.

Information for this study was obtained via an Organizational Climate Questionnaire that was mailed to each county DCBS office. The questionnaire used was a Likert-type scale with twenty-five closed ended questions, two open ended questions to write in, and five demographic questions. Prior to initiating the study, telephone contact was made with each supervisor in each office informing them of the study and asking for their assistance in distributing and collecting the questionnaires. The information obtained was anonymous with no identifying links to the respondents. In addition, a transmittal letter was included with the survey and served as informed consent.

The Dillman Design data collection strategies was used in this study to promote increased response rate, reduced item non-response, and reduced social desirability bias (Siebert, 2004). Respondents were sent a letter of introduction to the study, followed by the questionnaire approximately three days later. The questionnaires were mailed to each office in a large envelope and included a stamped envelope without a return address for questionnaires to be returned to surveyor. Reminder postcards and replacement questionnaires were sent at three-week intervals during a twelve week period to those who had not responded.

Telephone contact was made with the supervisor throughout the twelve week period to determine status of survey and the need for more questionnaires. This was a pilot study and only had face validity. Reliability could not be determined until survey replies were received. A pilot test was conducted in Rockcastle County to test the reliability of the questions prior to the initial mailing of the packet. Thirty two surveys were returned out of a possible 66 workers. The data was analyzed manually upon receipt to examine for errors and omissions and then entered into SPSS computer program for analysis. Univariate analysis of frequencies and descriptive statistics were obtained.

Discussion

SOP and child protection policies are the “bible” for child protection practice and provide a guide for job duties and requirements. Child protection workers already face many hurdles in completing their job duties and finding the time to read weekly changes to the SOP and policy presents a challenge. It was hypothesized that child protection workers do not have enough time to read the SOPs and policies every time there is a change even though the changes are meant to be utilized in practice.

The present literature has shown that child protection offices across the United States are faced with workloads that are too heavy, caseloads that are too high, high caseworker turnover, too few caseworkers per office, along with increased reliability and accountability. Thus, as the author hypothesized, this study found that SOP and policy changes create an additional burden for the worker and adds to their work related stress and workers do not have time to read the changes.

Several significant factors relating to organizational climate were revealed in the data and are as follows. 65.6% of the workers reported the amount of work expected of them is not reasonable; 75% stated they do not have time to complete job duties; 65.7% stated their offices do not have adequate staff to meet the needs of the clients, 93.8% said policies and SOPs change too often; 53.1% stated they are not able to keep up with SOP changes; 78.1% said SOPs change too often; and 90.6% feel stress because of their job.

Two open-ended questions were asked in the survey. The first question stated, “identify two or three things the Cabinet could do to improve as an organization”. The most often stated responses were to increase staff, value employees and demonstrate this, and decrease regional staff and add more field workers. The second question stated, “identify two of three things the Cabinet could do to make your job less stressful”. Responses to this were similar and were; increase front line staff, less staff at regional level, and eliminate fluff positions. Based on the results of this survey, workers feel a lot of stress in their jobs and do not have time to complete their duties. This is very disturbing, as ASFA provides federal mandates for “good practice” without providing the workers with the needed support and resources to meet these mandates.

The responsibility of protecting our families and children is a huge responsibility and a very serious matter. In order for the workers to provide the type of services needed and deserved to the families and children involved in child protection, support services, more positions, better pay, and continuous quality training and education must be provided.

The limitations of this study included no reliability, only face validity, no follow up study to be done, being a pilot study with no data to compare to, and the small sample size. Future research is needed in all counties in Kentucky to see if all child welfare agencies are struggling with day to day job duties. In addition, research is needed to improve service delivery, job retention and turnover, and to assist the front line worker with resources and support to better equip them in their daily job requirements.

The results of this study will be presented to the administrative Regional Office staff for employee satisfaction and organizational climate information from the perception of the workers. Hopefully, the information will be used for best practice guidelines and to create a better work environment for a very stressful profession.

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Research Design & Implementation

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Cabinet Workers' Understanding of Ever-Changing Standards of Practice

- Purpose of Study

To get workers' perceptions regarding the manageability of the changes to the Cabinet's Standards of Practice (SOP) and how these guide their daily job duties.

Do these changes to the SOP create further job stress?

Hypothesis

- Cabinet workers do not have time to read the changes to the SOPs which guides their practice and sets legal guidelines.
- Cabinet workers think the SOPs change too often and create more work related stress.

Obstacles in Child Protection Casework

- Excessive Caseloads
- Increasingly more difficult cases
- More families needing assistance
- Multiple job duties (e.g., investigators, protectors, treatment providers, monitors, & advocates)

Obstacles Continued:

- High personnel vacancy rates
- High staff turnover rates
- Insufficient staff
- Lack of needed resources
- Higher standards of accountability
- Depression & burn out

Methods

- Exploratory Survey
- Pilot Study
- Convenience Sample of 66 Cabinet Protection & Permanency Workers in the Cumberland Valley Region (Bell, Clay, Harlan, Jackson, Knox, Laurel, Rockcastle, and Whitley)

Methods Continued:

- Likert Type scale with 25 closed ended questions, 2 open ended questions, and 5 demographic questions
- Dillman Design data collection strategy
- SPSS Data Analysis
- Transmittal letter attached to front of survey for informed consent

Results

- 65.6% -Amount of work expected is not reasonable
- 75%-Do not have adequate time to complete job duties
- 65.7%-Caseloads are too heavy
- 65.6%-Do not have adequate staff to meet the needs of clients

Results Continued:

- 93.8%-Policies and SOP's change too often
- 53.1%-Not able to keep up with SOP changes
- 84.4%-Do not have time to read SOP changes
- 78.1%-SOP's change too often
- 90.6%-Feel stress because of job

Open-Ended Question #1:

- Identify 2 Or 3 things the Cabinet could do to improve as an organization.

Increase staff

Value employees and demonstrate

Decrease regional staff-add field workers

*eight people did not reply to question

Open-ended Question # 2

- Identify 2 or 3 things Cabinet could do to make job less stressful.

Increase number of front-line staff

Less staff at regional level

Eliminate fluff positions

*seven people did not answer

Limitations

- Face validity only-no reliability
- Pilot Study-no other data to compare
- No follow up study
- Small sample size

Future Research

- Survey all regions in Kentucky and compare to other states
- This study can be used by Cabinet as a baseline for more studies to help improve Cabinet workplace